

DIVERSITY NEWS

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Thomas: Are you a full-time, forty-plus-hour-per-week employee? Maybe you're also a newlywed Generation Xer? Or a new parent?

Yvonne: Or are you an employee from the Baby Boom generation? Perhaps you're taking care of your own aging parents AND children?

Thomas: We all have lives outside of our jobs and away from the workplace (although it may not seem like it sometimes) and it can be difficult to manage our responsibilities at work while ALSO keeping up with our duties as parents, spouses, and caretakers.

Yvonne: That's right! But there is a way for employers to aid their employees in organizing their career AND family lives. It's called "workplace flexibility."

Thomas: Not only can a flexible work environment help EMPLOYEES manage their responsibilities at home and at work, but EMPLOYERS can actually benefit from such work/life policies.

Yvonne: In this edition of Diversity News, we'll take a look at flexibility in the workplace: what this term means, different options for creating a flexible work environment, and how both employees and employers can benefit from these kinds of arrangements.

Yvonne: It's a competitive working world out there and employers want to have the ability to select employees from a wide and diverse pool of talented applicants.

Organizations want to be able to attract and retain the best and the brightest! In order to do this, they want to be known as an "employer of choice."

But in order to become an employer of choice—in order to attract and retain talented, well-qualified, high-performing individuals—employers need to keep their employees happy and productive.

This is especially difficult when growing numbers of employees are feeling stretched thin between their responsibilities at home and at work.

According to Families and Work Institute's status report on workplace flexibility, When Work Works, the majority of employed Americans feel deprived of time.

The Institute's most recent National Study of the Changing Workforce found that 67 percent of employed PARENTS say they don't have enough time with their children, 63 percent of MARRIED employees say they don't have enough time

with their husbands or wives, and 55 percent of employees say they don't have enough time for themselves.

Workers are paying the price for this work/life imbalance, but they aren't the only ones suffering.

It is also a major concern for EMPLOYERS, since this can cost businesses in terms of absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover, and direct medical, legal, and insurance fees.

This situation provides organizations, who are searching for a means to become the employer of choice and who are also looking to maximize productivity and profit, with the opportunity to support work/life policies or initiatives that provide workplace flexibility.

Thomas: The Families and Work Institute identifies flexibility as: A way to define how and when work gets done and how careers are organized.

It is not a one-size fits-all policy or program, but a variety of work options that reflect job responsibilities, life situations, as well as individual and business needs.

Of all work/life benefits, work arrangements such as flextime, part-time work, job sharing, and telecommuting are often cited in research studies as the most helpful.

TRADITIONAL flextime allows employees to select their starting and stopping times within a range of hours surrounding core-operating hours PERIODICALLY, while DAILY flextime allows for selection on a DAILY basis.

Part-time, or reduced-hours, work means working less than the typical 35 to 40 hour full-time work week. For example, working full days but fewer than five days per week, or working five days per week, but less than the typical eight hour day.

Three of the most common forms of reduced-hours work are part-time positions, phased retirement, and job shares (where two employees share one full-time job with its pro-rated salary and benefits).

Telecommuting, or telework, deals with flexibility and place of work, or flex-place. Flex-place is the ability to work regularly scheduled hours somewhere other than an employer's main location and includes the option to work off-site (for example, being able to work from home either occasionally, for part of the work week, or on a full-time basis).

Yvonne: But workplace flexibility encompasses a broad range of work arrangements in addition to these better-known options. Workplace flexibility can assume a variety of forms that can be permanent or temporary. These include:

Flexibility in the scheduling of full-time work hours (including not only flextime, but compressed work schedules). A compressed work week enables employees to work their allotted hours over fewer days—such as 10 hours per day over 4 days, or 80 hours over 9 days. Some companies even offer “summer hours” by adding an hour to workdays Monday through Thursday, and ending work at one pm on Fridays.

Flexibility in the amount of time working (including not only part-time, but part-year, or for fewer weeks than in the standard work year). Part-year work means working reduced hours on an ANNUAL basis, rather than a daily or weekly basis.

And career flexibility, or flex careers, with options for entering and exiting the labor force for an extended period of time with the ability to re-enter the paid labor market. This includes formal leaves and sabbaticals, as well as career leave for re-training.

Thomas: Options to manage unexpected personal and family responsibilities are also types of flexible work arrangements.

These “flex-leaves” are the ability to take time off during the workday to address personal or family issues and includes time off for ANTICIPATED issues (such as a parent-teacher conference or to care for an elderly relative) and UNANTICIPATED issues.

Time off to care for children, which involves being allowed to take a few days off to care for a sick child without losing pay or without having to make up some other reason for absence.

Time off for personal illness.

And parental leave, which is planned time off for mothers and fathers for the birth, adoption, or care of a child.

Here are other work arrangements that are characteristic of a flexible workplace:

Being able to take breaks when needed.

Having a work shift that is desirable.

Having complete or a lot of control over your work schedule.

Seldom being required to work paid or unpaid overtime with little or no notice.

And believing that one can use flexible work arrangements without jeopardizing job advancement.

Yvonne: Although workers of all ages express interest in flexibility, there are options that might appeal to some workers and not to others, and everyone may not even need or want flexible work arrangements.

We all have different events going on in our lives—various long-term and temporary roles and responsibilities—that could require different types—or combinations—of workplace flexibilities.

For members of older generations, who usually divide their time between work and other life issues that are just as important to them, benefits like flextime or reduced-hours work for phased retirement might be most important.

For members of the Baby Boom generation, having flex-leave, flextime, telecommuting or a compressed work week would be appropriate so that they can take care of an elderly parent, for example.

Members of Generations X and Y (or Nexters) might appreciate parental leave if they are starting their own families or they could benefit from career flexibility so that they can take time to finish their educations or raising children before returning to their careers.

Flextime, part-time work, or a compressed work week would also be beneficial to those employees who are students as well.

Thomas: Workplace flexibility enables employees—men, women, parents, non-parents, employees of all ages and at different earning levels—to better manage their responsibilities at home and at work, but it can ALSO be an effective strategy to enhance businesses' competitive advantage.

Flexibility has often been positioned as simply a benefit or accommodation to EMPLOYEES, but EMPLOYERS can gain tremendous benefit from providing flexibility in WHEN and HOW work gets done. Organizations can use it as a tool for improving recruitment and retention, for managing workload, and for responding to employee diversity.

The When Work Works initiative reveals that when flexibility is used as a tool to help organizations and their employees, both can win.

In fact, research conducted by the Families and Work Institute shows that in organizations with high levels of flexibility:

66 percent of employees report high levels of job engagement and commitment. In organizations with low levels of flexibility, this number drops to 56 percent.

72 percent of employees plan to remain with their employers for the next year. In organizations with low levels of flexibility, only 49 percent do.

And 67 percent of employees report high levels of job satisfaction. In organizations with low levels of flexibility, only 23 percent are satisfied.

Yvonne: The impact of flexibility on recruitment and retention is one of the best-documented and most strongly-argued aspects of the flexibility business case.

The Families and Work Institute argues that flexibility is important to business for a number of reasons:

To attract talent. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that the American labor force is growing less than one percent annually, and the number of available workers between the ages of 25 and 44 is actually shrinking. The need for qualified people forces companies to rethink their work schedules and work processes, most of which were designed for a different generation of workers with different lifestyles and working conditions.

To retain valued employees. Turnover is expensive! The Saratoga Institute found that it costs 150 to 200 percent of an exempt person's yearly salary to replace that employee. Families and Work Institute, on the other hand, found that allowing an employee a one-year parental leave only costs 32 percent of a year's salary. And Aetna found that its family leave program INCREASED retention. After extending the length of maternity leave, 91 percent of women returned to work following leave, while only 77 percent returned when the leave period was shorter.

To raise morale and job satisfaction. There are clear links between job satisfaction and turnover.

To improve productivity. A survey by a provider of human resources and employment law information revealed the hidden costs of unscheduled absences, which is about 1.5 million dollars for large companies. They also found that instead of illness, family issues are now the most often cited reason for taking time off. Other non-sickness reasons cited are stress and personal demands like care for elderly dependents.

And to reduce stress or burnout. All forms of stress have been found to lead to other problems that affect productivity and are potentially costly to business.

Thomas: In the “Supervisors’ Guide to Flexibility,” Dana Friedman writes that although flexibility can be beneficial to the organization, supervisors, and employees, flexible work arrangements can also pose a series of challenges.

Supervisors are the voice of the organization; they translate the culture of the organization to employees. They are also the gatekeepers to flexibility. Supervisors might worry about being fair to employees when they know everyone can’t have flexibility.

Besides concerns of equity, some employers simply resist change. One reason that flexible work options such as flextime may meet with resistance is that they challenge some long-held assumptions about work such as “presence equals productivity”—an assumption that just doesn’t hold up in an economy that is increasingly turning to results, not just time on the job, as a measure of productivity.

Then there is the fear of abuse and the assumption that “if you give employees an inch, they will take a mile.” But if employees are well managed, abuse will be kept to a minimum. And, as Institute data reveal, the opposite is more likely to be true: If you give employees an inch (or more flexibility), they are more likely to go that extra mile for their employers.

Also, some employers might believe that it takes more time to manage. Interviews with managers at JPMorganChase who supervise employees with flexible work arrangements reveal far fewer problems than managers anticipated: 95 percent say it does not require more time; 88 percent report no negative impact on their ability to supervise; and 66 percent say it enhanced their management skills.

Then there are the concerns of employees who might fear that a flexible work arrangement will have a negative impact on their careers. They worry about:

Being treated like second-class citizens. Many who work part-time feel they are not seen as committed as others.

And missed opportunities. People using flexible work arrangements worry that they may be passed over for challenging assignments or a promotion.

But in order to be a successful flexible workplace, and an employer of choice, organizations should not make their employees feel that flexible arrangements jeopardize their careers.

Yvonne: You can find much more information on workplace flexibilities on the Families and Work Institute Web site at the address shown below. There you can find a toolkit that highlights workplace flexibility and also provides resources

like tip sheets on how companies, managers, and employees can work towards creating more effective workplaces.

Thomas: But that's all we have time for in this edition of Diversity News. Be sure to check back with us next month when we'll be talking about people with disabilities in the workplace.

Yvonne: Until then... for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below... with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Thomas: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work... available as a download on our Web site... or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from you! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov... with the words DIVERSITY NEWS in the subject line.

Yvonne: Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!